eye

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Yale Arts Association
Number Two

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Page 2 **Homage to a Teacher: Josef Albers**
Arnold Bittleman

4 **Portfolio of Drawings and Prints**
Students of Albers at Yale 1950–1958

15 **Thoughts on Urban Design**
David Lewis

18 **The Project at New Zion: Interaction and Building**
Charles Moore

22 **Building for Learning: Ski House in Warren, Vermont**

24 **Film at Yale: The Opportunity is Waiting**
Howard S. Weaver

28 **Is Film an Art?**
Standish Lawder, David Rumsey, John Strawbridge

32 **The Computer and the Artist**
Aaron Marcus

36 **The Yale Light Show**
Introduction: Jack Tworkov
Commentary: Yale Research Associates

40 **The Walker Art Museum**
Commentary: Herbert Brooks Walker
Photographs: Robert Nix

46 **Department Report**
City Planning
Christopher Tunnard

47 **Lectures, Seminars and Conferences**
Academic Year, 1967–1968

48 **Contributors to This Issue**

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The Yale Art School Light Show

Introduction: Jack Tworkov, Chairman, Department of Art
Commentary: Michael Cain, Patrick Clancy,
William Crosby, William Duesing, Paul Fuge,
Peter J. Kindlmann, David M. Rumsey

You climb up several flights of stairs to the top floor, you enter a near empty white loft. Carefully arranged in different sections of the long room are banks of numerous fluorescent light tubes—some of these are organized after the fashion of primary modular sculptures. At one end neon tubes outline large rectangles. Banks of fluorescent lights are suspended in various places from the angled studio ceiling. One corner is partitioned off to contain a considerable amount of electronic apparatus. This is the operating area. Here and there are silvered reflecting surfaces and translucent plastic sheets.

The utility lights of the loft go off. You are in total darkness. Soundpulse—silence—soundpulse—lightflash—darkness—lightflash—darkness. Electronically produced sound that in turn electronically triggers sequenced lights. The fluorescent tubes light up and go out in a succession of discrete, rhythmic impulses. The sound crackles, or beeps in ordered rhythms. You look at a bank of lights and a flash of light crackles behind you. You turn. You tip-toe in the dark room from one bank of lights to the other from one end of the loft to the other. You sit on the floor, lean against the wall. After five, ten minutes it gets monotonous, even boring, but at the end of fifteen minutes you are somewhat in a trance. When the sound stops and the utility lights go on again you realize that for fifteen and/or twenty minutes you were subjected to an experience as concrete as a shower.

You may experience a strange serenity or a keen sense of stimulation.

I imagine many readers have already experienced light-sound shows in various places. They are popular in night clubs. I have sat through a number of light shows, but I was never much impressed with them. What impressed me then in the studio on Orange Street?

First: The negative aspects—there was a merciful absence of any effort either to entertain or lobotomise the witness.

Second: The arrangement of the whole studio and the distribution of lights had a balance and direction that implied care, thoughtfulness ahd enthusiasm.

Third: The performance was sober, measured and completely devoid of trickiness.

At this point it's inconsequential to try to anticipate what light and sound may evolve into. Serious tinkering with this medium has just begun. It has the possibility of becoming either performance oriented, or environment oriented. I would like to see something tried in a public square for a transient, passing audience, rather than for a gathered audience. I would like to see what can be done with color. I would like to see a more esthetic development of the space in which it all happens, so that we are not only presented with light and sound, but with light, sound, shape and space.

This studio workshop on Orange Street is a paradigm of the kind of experimental work shop devoted to specific projects that I would like to see in the graduate school, a school that would not only reflect the market oriented art world, but would erect centers where the highly motivated student and/or teacher could pursue studies with the detachment we expect from scholars, philosophers and, of course, artists.

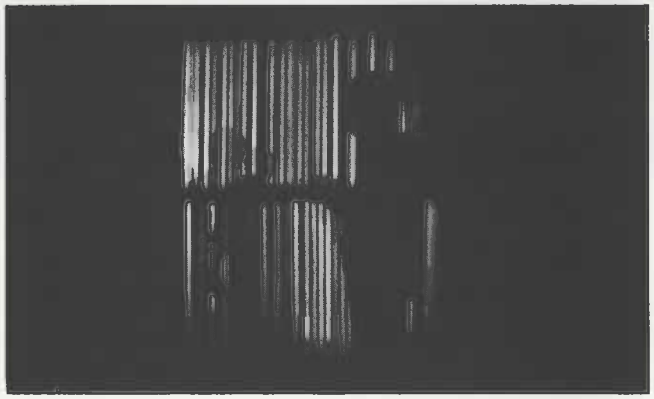
The evidence of what this experimental studio has meant in terms of teaching can be gaged by the undergraduate, graduate students, and faculty have flocked to this studio.

The initiators of this project merit the staunchest support from the Art School as well as from the University.

"In ancient art the flash could only be achieved metaphorically."
—Dick Roberson

We envision a generalized processing device which will be able to relate a set of inputs (tape recorded information, random noise, sound generators, audience activity) to a set of outputs (sound sources, light sources, vibrating-reflectors). All processing would be done in terms of standardized variables (voltage and frequency) which can have discreet as well as continuously variable states. Processing will also permit conversion between these two variables of voltage and frequency as well as the ability to make logical decisions. All processing would be under the control of a recorded program which could be modified by a further set of inputs.
The system could be viewed, therefore, as an analog-digital computer hybrid.

When separated from nature in an indoor environment through electronic programming, the phenomena of light and sound are uniquely capable of being perceived as literal physical entities and simultaneously as sources of complex, non-referential information. We have used light and sound as material substances and have deployed them in an actual space. We gave form to this plastic matter by programming its operation over time, the result being a plotless, abstract drama which takes its cues more from psychophysiology and electronic music than from theater. Our medium in this work has been electronic technology and our method has been to design and to operate our instruments ourselves to insure the kind of natural feedback upon which the development of artistic traditions has always depended.



Continuous light, melodic music, and referential art, all of which surround us from birth, combine in powerful, almost insidious ways to create a rigid perceptual attitude which shapes our raw perceptions into a world we have been made to see. To remove the modes of filtering that contemporary civilization has built into our minds it is necessary to accept perceptions at an elemental level and to re-interpret these perceptions in their original complexity.

Our involvement with technology began with the acquisition of equipment used in sound generation and in the composition of electronic music. After gaining familiarity with this equipment, we decided to add further circuitry to permit simultaneous generation of both light and sound, and storage of the control impulses on tape. From this system we have learned that making programs for the environment has two aspects: our artistic decisions and the shaping of these decisions by the inherent structure of the circuitry. Programs evolving in the context of existing equipment have led to a need for more flexible electronic systems; these systems in turn have implied new esthetic considerations in a process of dynamic feedback. Recently two engineers joined our group. The result has been a continuing dialogue between artist and scientist which has given our work the combined energy and resources of both disciplines.

The time-space extension of our programmed light and sound is quantified to the scale and rhythm of human perception. It is unlike "multi-media" in that it is unified and abstract; it is unlike "psychedelia" in that it is neither imitative of experience nor phantasmagoric.

Initially, our experiment grew from the collaboration of a group of individuals and was developed independently of the school. However, it soon became apparent that the resources of the University were ideally suited to the needs of our project. Fortunately in our relationship with Yale over the past year, we have been able to pursue the natural evolution of our work in complete freedom from the commercial entanglements which have stunted so many ventures in technological art. Furthermore, government surplus supplies, available to educational institutions at a fraction of their original cost, have helped us within the confines of our early budget. Finally, the intellectual community of both faculty and students provides not just specialized information and informed appraisals of our work, but, most importantly, an advanced and highly stimulating long-term audience through which we have been able continuously to refine our programs.